

FIRST LETTER

December 25th, 1998 - Letter - Rome

Dear fellow Oblates

Everyone's life is studded with moments of grace. They might occur at the time of a new beginning, or during periods of crisis. They might consist in a deep experience of God or be expressed through some gratifying human event. Families, communities, and peoples experience these moments of grace. For the Oblates the canonization of St. Eugene was one of these moments, and its echo can still be heard today. In the Church, the Jubilee Year will be "a year of grace." We have already begun preparing for it. The recent General Chapter was held just between these two events. I am convinced that this also was a strong moment of grace.

1. The grace of the 1998 General Chapter

It was said repeatedly that the most notable aspect of our meeting was the special atmosphere of fraternity and unity that marked it from beginning to end. Both this climate and the strong unity of criteria were clearly evident during the elections: almost all ten members of the Council were elected on the first ballot and with a two-thirds majority. To what can we attribute such an atmosphere and extraordinary unity? To a great extent it is certainly due to the spirit of community that Archbishop Zago and his team promoted during the years of their mandate. In the name of all Oblates I wish to express my gratitude to him and to the outgoing Council for this work and for all that the Congregation owes to them. The very positive climate at the Chapter was without a doubt also a result of the recognition of our Founder as a saint for the whole Church. It was an event that gave the Oblates strength. In any case, the spirit of this Chapter was a gift from above. We cannot forget how many people were praying for us.

In my closing words to the Chapter I was able to say that for me personally it had been an experience of the Spirit, such as I have rarely felt before in my life. I do not think that we can doubt the presence of the Spirit whose fruits were so tangible: love, peace, joy (the African dances come especially to mind). Without a special gift of the Holy Spirit, how could there be such a unity in a group of 114 persons of 27 different nationalities, two-thirds of whom were taking part in such an assembly for the first time? We, the Oblates who were gathered in Chapter, were led to feel a legitimate pride in being part of this Congregation that evangelizes from the North Pole to the tip of South Africa, that works in the secularized societies of the Western world as well as among peoples steeped in ancient religious traditions, or in countries of the former Soviet block. Many lay people are taking part in this mission and some of them have become attached to our charism in a special way. We received their representatives at the beginning of the Chapter and witnessed their enthusiasm. How good it is to belong to such a family! We feel something of what Saint Eugene wrote: "...by loving each other as brothers, by considering our Society only as the most united family which exists on earth...." (*Letter to Guibert* July 29, 1830).

I am convinced that all this was a free gift of God, a fruit of the Spirit. We who have experienced this are called to give thanks and praise. But God's exceptional gifts always include an invitation to mission. The Spirit creates communion first of all, then asks something more of us because the Spirit is also the protagonist of the mission (RM 21). This meeting that we have lived commits us strongly to the Oblates.

2. Our mission on the threshold of the third millennium: to evangelize

As regards mission, we capitulars felt clearly that the Lord was making the same call to us Missionary Oblates that He did at the beginning of the Congregation: evangelize the poor. This is the same one as always, yet it is different. The number of poor never stops increasing, but they are not always the same groups of people as in the past. The Chapter document will tell us that we have to evaluate our present works. It will speak to us of total evangelization, of dialogue as a way of the Gospel, of specialization and professionalism, of the means of social communication, etc. Saint Eugene would say "How vast the field that lies before them!" (Preface). I will not say any more about these challenges now. I simply want to answer a more immediate question: where to start ?

3. Where to start?

The Chapter theme was definitely evangelization, and not community or religious life. However, I was struck by what "the Holy Spirit and we" ended up writing at the end of our Letter to the Congregation. I would say that the document makes an unexpected change in theme there. Immediately after having spoken about the poor, the Chapter speaks of the Oblates as Religious. This implies that we always strive to make Christ the center of our lives. That is what Constitution 12 tells us: "Our mission requires that in a radical way we follow Jesus who was chaste and poor and who redeemed the world by his obedience." Then just after that, the capitulars insist on community, going so far as to recommend that in as much as possible we live in community under one roof. So, where to start? Evangelization at the threshold of the third millennium must start with ourselves, with our own religious and community life.

I would like to use an image - an icon - to interpret this turn in the Chapter's theme. I already said that our meeting was a strong experience of the Holy Spirit for me. At a certain moment, I felt that we were as though in the Cenacle, with Mary and the Apostles during the nine days that preceded Pentecost (Acts 1:14). That novena in Jerusalem was necessary as a time of gestation before setting out with missionary daring to preach to the peoples of all nations. It seems to me therefore that we Oblates, before taking action, must "enter into a state of Cenacle." It is only in this way that the new millennium can begin as a new Pentecost. I speak of the Cenacle of the living memory of the Risen One of constant prayer of community life of apostles. Mary will also be with us as mother, not of our natural life, but of our Oblate life as disciples of Christ, as his missionaries. I make a concrete proposal to enter this Cenacle beginning this Advent and Christmas: let us again give all the importance due to that daily hour of prolonged silent prayer - the oraison inherited from our Founder - and spend "part of this time together in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament" (C 33).

This letter also wants to convey my Christmas greetings to all of you. I pray that during this Advent that leads into 1999 John the Baptist, Mary and Eugene - "the man of Advent" according to John Paul II - may help all of us feel the power of the Spirit. This Spirit came down upon Mary so that God could become man - the Spirit that in the cenacle can transform and renew us so that Christ can be born in the men and women of the new millennium. May the Great Jubilee Year be the bursting forth of a new missionary Pentecost for our Congregation "small, it is true, but that will always be strong as long as it is holy!" (*St. Eugene to Tempier*, Aug. 22, 1817). Merry Christmas!